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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to help Taiwanese English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) college students construct the concept of gender equality by reading and responding to two gender issues: housework and virginity. Educational researchers have been interested in and aware of the importance of promoting the concept and practice of gender equality in education. How exactly to accomplish this in the 0FL classroom has been the subject of some controversy. Twenty Taiwanese EFL students participated in the study. Journal responses, oral interviews, and questionnaires were used to gather data for this paper; a thematic analysis and comparative content analysis were used to analyze and interpret the data. As a result, three themes were generated: a conventional self, a transactional self, and a constructive self. The results indicated that EFL college students, for various reasons, responded positively to the use of the two gender issues, since these issues not only improved their language proficiency in English but also promoted their critical responses to the concept of equality. Some pedagogical implications are suggested for classroom practice, namely: EFL teachers should become gender attentive as teaching itself can be a means of learning and promoting gender equity. This study has demonstrated that there are powerful connections between literacy and gender. (Contains 15 references.) (KFT)

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ED 439 612

Constructing Gender Through Literacy in an EFL Class

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to help Taiwanese EFL college students construct the concept of gender equality by reading and responding to two gender issues: housework and virginity. Twenty Taiwanese EFL college students participated in the study. Journal responses, oral interviews and questionnaires were used to gather data for this paper, whereas a thematic analysis and a comparative content analysis were used to analyze and interpret the data. As a result, three themes were generated for detailed interpretation of the results of this study:a conventional self, a transactional self, and a constructive self. The results indicated that EFL college students, for various reasons, responded positively to the use of the two gender issues since these issues not only improved their language proficiency in English, but also promoted their critical responses to the concept of equality. Some pedagogical implications are suggested for classroom practice.

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We view things not only from different sides; but with different eyes; we have no wish to find them alike.

--- Blaise Pascal

1. Introduction

In recent years, the educational researchers in Taiwan from different disciplines have been aware of the importance of promoting the concept of equality in school; however, the question of how to promote such a concept in an English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) class has become a thorny one in that linguistic components such as vocabulary and grammar learning are always the primary concern (Cochran, 1996). In order to assist those with limited competence in English as well as to promote the concept of equality in EFL classes, two issues, housework and virginity, were used with reference to gender relationships to investigate how participants responded to and changed their attitudes toward the concept of gender equality.

2. Theoretical Foundations

In ESL/EFL classes, language learning and knowledge acquisition are always viewed as two separate entities, of which the linguistic component is the major focus of English instruction. The underlying assumption behind this notion is that learning the language, especially its vocabulary and grammar, is still the primary concern. In the past two decades, fortunately, the schema theorists and the interactional view of reading have come a long way in confirming the close realtionshps between a reader's background knowledge and his/her comprehensibility of an atrticle (Carrell, Devine, Eskey, 1989).

Viewing reading as inquiry means readers are pushed to go beyond the text to symbolize themselves and re-symbolize their ideas or interpretations in their social and cultural context. Reading is not only an experience but a coming to know

oneself, an investment and a commitment. Texts simply exist metaphorically in the world or serve as symbolic representations of the world as readers experience them (Rosenblatt, 1978). More importantly, the function of a text is not only to encode the author's experience in order that one may, in a sense, live through it, but also to know oneself, to render a new self, and to nuture the seeds of self (Beach, 1990; Myers, 1988). From an inquiry point of view, readers find their voice, define their knowing on the page, and bring themselves to the text while integrating their own beliefs and sense with the text as well as with their peers; in this way, reading is a means by which to outgrow our current selves (Cairney, 1990; Schweickart, 1988; Harste, 1992, personal communication). Unlike the interactinal view of reading, in which the role of reader is usually described based on what a good reader should be like or what a reader should do, the inquiry view of reading sees that such roles are identified by readers themselves. Readers create their personal identity, by which they re-position their subjective voice and stance. A role is assigned by the public, teachers, researchers, or strategic readers, whereas identity is a process of self-realization. Identity is involved in how the selves are produced and reproduced through the social, cultural and historical matrix. Reading becomes, then, an intersubjective encounter, one in which the text is a subjectified object and readers have to stand on the author's shoulders to re-position themselves while joining with the text (Eco, 1979; Lloyd, 1998; Schenke, 1996). For instance, *Sleeping Beauty* can be read from a feminist or a romantic point of view. Texts are like multifaceted gems that can be seen many different ways by each reader based upon the point of view from which he/she is viewing. The inquiry journey of reading is a continuous self-exploration, self-discovery, and self- reflection through curiosity, questions, and risk-taking. With the inquiry view of reading in mind, we EFL educators need to create collaborative contexts in which individuals are able to explore their conflicting views of the world and we need to engage readers in inquiry. It is by means of collaboration that some will

see more sparkle and dazzle; others will see geometric shapes; some will see brilliance; others will see natural beauty transformed (Myers, 1988) . By doing so, not only is our basis for interpreting the text broadened, but readers are also challenged to learn and to think for themselves and beyond themselves (Blenky, et al, 1986; Short, 1991). Thus, inquiry is a process that begins with learning and ends with conversation. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to investigate how twenty EFL college students employed two gender issues, housework and virginity, to learn, to change, and to inquire throughout the process of reading, responding to and talking about the texts.

3. About the Study

3.1 The Research Setting and Participants.

The setting for this research is located at the National Chung Cheng University (NCCU). NCCU is a 6,000-student national university located in a small town in the middle of Taiwan, Ming-shiung, Chia-yi County, Taiwan. In order to be accepted by this university, students were requested to pass a competitive national joint entrance examination.

Twenty Taiwanese college students participated in this research. All of them were English majors and they were all taking Freshman English Oral Training as a required course with me when this study was conducted. This course was held for two hours once a week, eighteen weeks a semester. All participants were infomed of the reserach to be conducted before they formally registered for this course. In general, these participants had been exposed to at least six years of high school English, taught mainly by the grammar-translation method, and one semester of university-level English, also in Taiwan, and many of them planned to go abroad for advanced degrees. That is, the participants in this study were from similar cultural and language learning backgrounds.

3.2 Materials for Reading and Responding

Two steps were taken to select materials for participants to read and then respond. The teacher first selected a text related to each issue—housework and virginity— for students to read and respond to. The next week, each participant was required to select two English articles centering on each issue. Participants were allowed to select articles from different resources and then brought them to share with group members and classmates. Two types of discussion were involved in sharing and exchanging ideas on these two issues; one was the small group discussion, the other, the whole class discussion.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures.

In order to investigate how EFL college students employ the concept of equality in learning and inquiry, three types of data were gathered for this study: journal responses, face-to-face oral interviews, and questionnaires.

(a) **journal responses:**

Each participant was requested to keep a journal related to the two issues. The participants were allowed to respond either before or after they had discussed the reading materials. The journal writing allowed them to freely express ideas. Each participant was requested to write at least one response to each reading material.

(b) face-to-face oral interviews:

Participants were invited to be interviewed either at the time when the two gender issues were implemented or at a later date. Usually the interviews took place in the process of this research conducted. The voluntary participants were allowed to select a suitable schedule at their convenience. The interview form was semi-structured; that is, a list of questions was prepared in advance, serving as a guideline in the process of interviews. Ten participants were willing to be interviewed and each interview generally lasted 20-30 minutes. They were all free

to use either English or Chinese in the process of interviews. The interview data was audio taped and transcribed verbatim by two research associates. Only the responses relevant to the three themes of the discussion section are reported in this paper.

(c) Open-ended Questionnaires:

An open-ended questionnaire was given to all participants at the end of the semester. This questionnaire served as an overall evaluation of this course. In this paper, only the questions relevant to the three themes discussed below are included.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures.

In order to examine how these participants employed the two reading articles to inquire about the concept of equality, the response journals and the face-to-face oral interviews served as key resources for data analysis and interpretation. Topical units were first used to analyze the three types of data, and the related utterances or topical units reflected a common perspective and revealed a recurring pattern comprising a theme. I noted the key concepts in the margin and then used thematic analysis to analyze and interpret the data, focusing on how these participants employed the concept of equality to inquire into in the process of reading, responding to and talking about the two issues. Moreover, in order to obtain as unbiased and complete a picture as possible, I discussed my data analysis with six participants, who were willing to offer more time and assistance to debrief the data transcription, analsyis and interpretation. Any data which produced disagreement between us (me and any of the participants) were dropped from the data pool. That is, the transcripts were first coded by myself as the researcher and then by two freshman EFL instructors. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved. The inter-rater credibility we eventually reached was 81%, and 82% and 83% between the two EFL instructors themselves.

3.5 Results and Discussion.

My discussion of the following three themes in my participants' responses to the two gender issues, housework and virginity, should be construed as representing a series of necessarily separate entities. In fact, these themes can be and should be viewed as recursively and simultaneously occurring in the classroom work. The separation of such a particular sequence of these themes is, then, reflective more of rhetorical needs than of the natural processes participants go through.

Theme 1: A conventional self.

Seeing is not believing, but comes from believing. What is known determines what comes to be known. It is impossible not to integrate learners' beliefs and their views of the words and of the world within the whole process of reading , discussing and responding to the texts as well as responding to their peers and instructors. My participants' beliefs about the concept of equality were first integrated with their conventional beliefs. With these beliefs, a self was first challenged in the situations where a participant's values, attitudes, and judgments toward the concept of "equality" are based upon or guided by their previous life experiences and educational backgrounds. Such beliefs sometimes even hinge on self-assertion. That is, with the uncertainty about their self-worth, the participants are sometimes prevented from claiming the existence of the concept of "inequality" so self-assertion falls prey to the conventional values and beliefs. The following examples demonstrates such cases.

[Example 1a: Data extracted from journal resonse]

> *I have never thought about the connections between the household and inequality. I believe the wife usually takes care of her children much better than the husband since a woman is more careful, considerate and thoughtful.*

[Example 1b: Data extracted from oral interview]

Webber brought up an interesting idea that 'some cooks like to teach their wives how to cook.' I liked the discussion but I think this is a way how the cook expressed his love for his wife. I don't think the cook feels more superior to his wife.

[Example 1c: Data extracted from journal response]

I think virginity is important to marriage, especially for girls. Although the virginity may not be tested but I still believe the husband can 'feel' about it.

From the above examples, the participants at this stage did not want to dismiss former ways of knowing so much as they wanted to stay alert to the fact that different perspectives and different points in time produce different answers. More importantly, they primarily searched for harmony, agreement, convergence and compatibility and as a result the self-assertion stemmed from a lack of sensibility and ability toward the development of the concept of equality.

[Example 1d: Data extracted from journal response]

After reading and discussing Osman's article in the class, I think we should respect a woman's choice. If she is happy to stay at home taking care of the children, why not let her do so. That's her decision. Like my mother, she always told me that she is willing to work everything for me and my father since my father worked hard outside. I think it is my mother's choice and we should respect her.

[Example 1e: Data extracted from oral interview]

All of my classmates' opinions made me shocked. It is hard to listen to them. ... What surprised me most is 'Do you feel ashamed to be a virgin?' Yes, I think virginity is a virtue to a girl. And I do expect my wife to be a virgin. If she is not, I will probably not get married to her. I don't want to get married to a second-hand girl.

[Example 1f: Data extracted from journal response]

Our discussion today was very interesting and I think they are right but to me virginity is still a way to protect me and to be loyal to my husband whether my

future husband is a 'virgin' or not. Virginity is a way to prove that I am a good girl.

The examples above have demonstrated that these participants seemed very open to take in what others had to offer but they emphasized acceptance more than evaluation, separation more than connection, and cooperation more than debate. Apparently, the cultural expectations focus on girls' moral development more than on their emotional, social, intellectual, or spiritual development. Consequently, the identities that have traditionally defined and framed them have been closely connected with both the boys' and the girls' moral judgment.

Theme 2: A transitional self

Doubts play a more dominant role than beliefs at the stage of the transitional self, in which my participants have changed from a conventional self, who believed the concept and the value of equality should be determined by the individuals, into a transitional self, who believed that the concept of inequality has been pervasive and that many of us are not aware of the inequality. The following examples, taken from the journal responses, exemplify such situations.

[Example 2a:Data extracted from journal responses]

From today's discussion and reading, I have some questions to ask. If the housewife gets paid from her husband, will the husband-wife relationship become like boss-worker. If so, the wife still plays an inferior role to the husband. In addition, does the husband have the right to fire his wife and then hire another housewife? Does the wife have right to quit or strike from her job? I think the idea that the housewives get paid will create more problems.

[Example 2b: Data extracted from oral interview]

In my family, my mother seldom ate with us at the table and she was always the last person to eat. Since a child, I haven't known why she has done this to herself, but from this issue, I know why, but I don't know how to help my mother as well as my family. I can do nothing about [the concept of] 'equality.'

[Example 2c: Data extracted from journal responses]

> *"I was so-called "bothered" by the "why-knowledge" in today's discussion. It seems everything can be questioned, including the good traditional values. If so, will the world become chaotic? Thus, I may feel confused all the time and then I may lose my life direction.*

[Example 2d: Data extracted from questionnaires]

> *The concept of "equality" is too idealistic, far away from the top of my head. What I learn most from this issue is about how to break through my "stereotypical thinking." I always take some ideas for granted and never respect people's differences.*

From the above examples, to some of my participants, change is a way of constructing the self and is value-laden. They came to understand that the mediated changes were only potentials that ultimately affected them in seeking change. In other words, no particular change was required, but in responding to any divergence or difference, they were affected --both by choosing to respond and making whatever choice they did. Furthermore, each change involved them in re-defining their values and beliefs about "gender relationships." Actualizing the change was eventually the focus of the source of their growth. My participants offered good examples of this transformational process in action as they verbally responded during the oral interviews and their journal responses. The following examples demonstrate such situations.

[Example 2e: Data extracted from journal response]

> *I like our discussion about the "cook." I have never thought about the idea that the teaching between husband and wife is more involved in inequality and a power relationship. Now I think the so-called "teaching" is not that simple as a way of expressing a husband's love to his wife. In my family, my father always loved to teach my moter how to do this how to do that. Why do women always feel proud to be taught? Does this mean that they wanted to be protected or be willing to be controlled? Why do they have to make their husbands feel superior to them? Is this also their responsibility as a "good wife"?*

[Example 2f: Data extracted from oral interivew]

> *In the beginning of our discussion, I was surprised that the boys in our class still cared so much about a girl's virginity. But later, I felt that such a concept is not only unfair but also stupid. Why should we girls be controlled by males? Why should we women be required to be loyal to men but not men to women?*

[Example 2g: Data extracted from questionnaire]

> *I like the ideas that we talked about 'divergence' and 'difference' in the class. [To] respect each other is the first step to get into the concept of equality.*

When speculation and an analytical hypothesis was presented to participants, they had an opportunity to integrate their own values, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes and to use these opportunities for the development of the self. While responding to others' experiences, they are "talking about themselves." By transforming, my participants were provided with a new world and a new self at every moment since they had gained new contexts and more meaningful potential. As the participant in [Example 2g] responded, divergence and differences create opportunities as well as problems in learning; they are a coin with two sides. Yet, some participants only saw one side, not the side full of potential for learning . To confront the other side required them not only to change, but also to doubt and even to inquire. Once the views are changed , of course, the turmoil, uncertainty, and doubt may simultaneously emerge, and this is what many participants have never encountered before. Yet such changes certainly provide opportunities for growth. On the other hand, some participants confronted the other side of the coin, the side which encourages change. Those participants at that moment have a strong belief that they need to change. Only by being willing to change their orientation toward the concept of gender relationships, can they grow. These changes have to be intentional and should be considered as growth.

Theme 3: A constructive self

Another major shift for my participants was from seeing themselves as a transitional self to seeing themselves as a constructive self. This change reflects upon the ways they re-identified and re-positioned themselves in order to learn further, especially for the participants with a strong sense of the conventional self. When some participants learned to use the self as an instrument to understand and to reconstruct their own frame of the world, they gradually discarded their former obsequiousness of the authoritarian voice derived from the reading text, the peer discussions, or even the instructor's interpretations . Instead, they, as constructivists, viewed such interactions as conversations or as communication, including discourse and exploration, talking and listening, questions, argument, speculation and sharing. That is, from a transitional self into a constructive self , there is an impetus to allow the self back into the process of knowing, to confront the pieces of the self that may be experienced as fragmented and contradictory. Unlike the transitional self, when participants reached the stage of a constructive self they frequently showed a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity. As a result, the constructivists were able to become passionate knowers, knowers who enter into a union with that which is to be known. The following examples exemplify such cases.

[Example 3a: Data extracted from journal response]

> *In today's discussion, I was most impressed with Dr. Chi's question "why? why do you say so?" In the beginning I didn't understand what she meant by "why?" because what I said [in the class] was all the facts in our daily life. ... now I know that the knowledge that I accepted in the past could be questioned. For instance, why not a man staying at home as a housebusand? Why does a wife always feel "proud of" her husband when he is more competent and successful than she but not vice versa?*

[Example 3b: Data extracted from journal response]

> *I am inspired to think about "why". Before entering college, I never asked myself such questions as "why do I think this way"? All the time, I*

accepted what my teacher, parents and classmates told me. Now, I am very happy to ask many "whys" b*ecause it really helps me to mediate the concept of equality. This is a meaningful class, more meaningful than ...*

[Example 3c: Data extracted from questionnaires]

I am impressed with Ray and Webber's opinions. Both of them inspired me to see how conservative and naive I was. Before this class, I saw virginity as a way to be loyal to my husband. I have never linked virginity with equality. Virginity was just a virtue to a girl. Ray's opinions are excellent and I think he was quite right with [the idea that] virginity is another way males control the girls.

Obviously, at this stage, my participants have to deal with confusion and disorientation as they battle with "role conflicts." In these situations, they blame themselves, in part, because of their inability to change the conventional values and beliefs. This is what I called "learner's guilt." Such guilt disturbs many participants, but the crux of their identity is the problem of inquiry. Fortunately, these confusions, uncertainties and perceived differences can be changed into the seeds of learning and the potential sources for ESL/EFL learners' growth when learners frame these moments as essential elements, naturally existing in the process of learning as inquiry. Such a change in learners' orientations and a shift in their understanding, the role of learning is not like-mindedness, but difference. Such changes of belief toward the concept of equality may assist my participants to learn more comfortably and confidently. More importantly, new identities will be generated. The following examples demonstrate such cases.

[Example 3d: Data extracted from journal response]

Most of the questions that we discussed today are hard to be answered or defined. However, many of my classmates seemed unaware of the importance of the issue. The first step is to help them be aware of the unequal relationships in terms of the concept of 'virginity' For me, I would try my best to get my confusing thoughts clear. I think I will be able to find a way for myself if I keep thinking.

[Example 3e: Data extracted from questionnaires]

> *I like the class very much. For it really enables me to question everything. I used to accept any information without considering it beforehand, but I can't do so in this class. The more we talked and discussed in the class, the more questions we had. We even discussed issues after this class.... I start to think about "who I am as a girl and what kind of girl I want to be". For sure, I can't be a traditional girl any more and I definitely don't want to be, but I don't know how to be a new girl in the "new new people generation". It seems I have been trapped [in between].*

[Example 3f:Data extracted from journal response]

> *I start questioning my professor's talking. Sometimes I even don't feel scared at all to challenge her thoughts because I think the relationship between me and my professor should be more equal in terms of 'knowledge [acquisition]'*

[Example 3g: Data extracted from journal response]

> *I find that the relationships between my professor and me are really unequal. It involves a lot of power. With knowledge as a type of power, we students dare not disagree with our professors. Inequality does not only exist in gender relationships but also in many situations [with different forms].*

My participants find their voice, define their knowing on the page, and bring themselves to the text while integrating their own beliefs and sense with the text; in this way, the self is a means by which to outgrow their current selves. Participants are able to pose questions to themselves about themselves. Sometimes, they frame the problem in terms of identity, asking "Who am I as a girl? What is my life about?" Sometimes this questioning is cast primarily in epistemological terms and the women ask, "In what way am I going to approach the world as a learner?" Sometimes the issue is seen more in moral terms: "What are the rights and responsibilities that I have to myself and others? On what basis can I choose when these conflict?" Whatever the focus, a thoroughgoing self-examination at this juncture leads to the construction of a way of thinking about knowledge, truth, and self that guides the person's intellectual and moral life and personal

commitments.

The concept of equality is like a multifaceted gem that can be seen from many different ways by each participant based upon the perspective from which one is viewing. The learner is never limited, however, to one view or, to put it more precisely, a learner's view is enriched by seeing it in relationship to other views. Some will see more sparkle and dazzle; others will see geometric shapes; some will see brilliance; others will see natural beauty transformed. Within each perspective, although partial solutions are possible, new problems continually arise, partly from the differences a learner notes when comparing his/her own views to those of others. Knowledge, therefore, is conceived of as always incomplete, tentative, and imperfect. This is why my participants belief about the concept of equality as a constructive process or as an inquiry process is ultimately pragmatic. The constructive/inquiry journey is a continuous process of self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-reflection through a conventional self, a transformational self, and then a contraceptive self. In fact, the concept of equality has itself become a site of inquiry and has revealed gaps and contradictions that participants could begin to address with their own theoretical insights.

4. Conclusion

In introspect, as I read and listened more carefully to these participants' expressions of their struggles, of resistance and of transformation, and as I reflected more deeply on my purposes for having students engage in these experiences, I realized how important it is for ESL/EFL teachers to help students first to question stereotypical gender roles as well as other ideas perpetuated by the dominant culture. With this concept, ESL/EFL learners may be better prepared to participate in a democratic society with equality. It is certainly understandable that the learning process toward equality is not smooth at all, but full of obstacles. The road to equality has not been well-paved so far, but at least, by reading these

texts on gender issues, we—both teachers and students of EFL—have another view of gender relationships derived from closely re-examining the past self as well as the present self . Most importantly, this study has demonstrated the powerful connections between literacy and gender in which teaching literacy will be able to promote the construction of gender. Gender, like literacy, is and can be socially and culturally constructed.

5. Implications

This study has implications both for further research and for pedagogical practice. For further research, this study shows that the lack of ownership and engagement, and the negotiation of students` true selves abound in a school recognized throughout the state for its quality Moreover, as with all qualitative research, the discussion delineated in this paper must be further researched in future studies conducted with larger numbers and different levels of ESL/EFL students. However, some pedagogical implications have surfaced at this early stage.

First, all teachers, particularly those who teach in an ESL/EFL classroom, should become gender attentive. With this attentiveness, the curriculum to connect students' knowledge, experiences, and interests requires ESL/EFL classroom teachers to further help students develop relevant knowledge and even take a critical and political stance.

Second, as the quotation at the outset suggests, ESL/EFL teachers are to stand beside students and do more with feminist work in ESL/EFL than merely replicating the power practices of benevolent, helping relations, then it matters to search out and challenge our implications, as teachers, in the very discourses of -- transformation we otherwise seek to contest. Equality is thus not simply one more social issue in ESL/EFL but a way of thinking, a way of teaching, and, most importantly, a way of learning.

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